

LATE CAPITALIST LYRIC: POLITICS IN AMERICAN POETRY (AND POETICS) SINCE 1945 *

Donald Wesling

University of California at San Diego

Though my thesis is that American poetry and poetics since 1945 are one final articulation of late capitalism as a mode of production, I make no pretense to link together Wallace Stevens' poems with the rise of drive-in movies or the Korean War, no pretense to connect the emergence of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets with the October 1987 stock market crash. As an historian of culture, I am less interested in such events than in the larger narrative to which they refer.

Any fair and reasonably complete catalogue of the public events of our lifetime would not be random, would have an inner cultural logic. I am persuaded of this by the arguments and details of Ernest Mandel's *Late Capitalism* (1972).¹ For Mandel, the era beginning in 1945 is not a new epoch, but rather a further development of the imperialist, monopoly-capitalist epoch (p. 10); its characteristics are uneven development of the spheres of production, massive penetration of capital into raw materials, significant reduction of real wages, a permanent arms economy, an extension of the State into the whole sphere of ideology with new belief in organization (not competition), and in the omnipotence of technology. The new media technology and post-industrial reproductive machinery are expressions of a new cultural space that has emerged, so we have an essentially post-national dynamic in the cultural as well as the political economy. Fredric Jameson in his 1984 essay, "Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", states that his periodization is both inspired and confirmed by Mandel's scheme of three movements in capitalism.² Each of the three phases—1848; 1890; 1945—marks a dialectical expansion of the mode of production, with the earlier forms swept up and kept within the later forms, though in recessive ways. These phases are the historical changes in market systems, power technology, and artistic modes. Late capitalism, in Jameson's account, is the purest form yet to have appeared, "a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas... This purer capitalism of our own time... eliminates the enclaves of precapitalist organization it had hitherto tolerated...: one is tempted to speak in this connection of a new and historically original penetration and colonization of Nature and the Unconscious." (p. 78). This new cultural logic, in the Jameson extension of Mandel, is the postmodern, a crisis in modernism that brings with it

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a new sensorium —a “hyperspace” that finds its most dramatic example in the glass skin and internal labyrinth of the 1970s Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, a space wherein we are lost without bearings among the surfaces.

Jameson has been reading American culture for the signs of what to him is monstrous, in its invention of a space and speech so often private as to be worthless. But he celebrates these innovations, too, because their presence signifies the emergence of an era that cancels out modernism, an era that more vividly seems to show Western culture in major transformation. Whether or not one accepts Jameson’s extension of Mandel whereby late capitalism produces postmodernity as its cultural logic, there is something promising here for the student of the politics of recent American poetry. What if we read lyric as a discourse that expresses and contests the era’s penetration of nature and the unconscious by capital’s drive for total organization —as a counterdiscourse that yet expresses, because it cannot escape, the norms of the dominant?

My examples are two poems with explicitly lyric-as-genre titles by John Ashbery and George Oppen, 58 lines out of the hundreds of thousands that the period has produced.³ Oppen’s 38-line “Ballad” has only four lines that register a dominant discourse: “Astrolabes and lexicons/Once in the great houses” (11.1-2); and “The rocks outlived the classicists,/The rocks and the lobsterman’s huts” (11.20-21). These hint an aristocratic and learned past, and imply the end of such a civilization, but with no judgment on it. The counterdiscourse to that sketch of a lapsed era and cultural logic makes up the rest of the poem, and takes in many details and gestures: the allusion to folk content in the title; the opposition to the great houses that comes from the common people and from the rocks that endure; despite the poverty and bad teeth of the lobsterman, he is master of his gear and trade, and he is “well-spoken”; the coming-round of the poem to the man’s wife: her reported speech gives the image of the connectness of islands beneath the water, an image of people and their shared world. There is some doubt whether the “I” of the secondlast line is the woman or Oppen himself speaking: plainly he likes that ambiguity of fading into her speech, of giving common people the last word in the poem. To talk about the common people is to write a wrenched and modest counterdiscourse.

The two 10-line stanzas of Ashbery’s “Art Songs” are in lines as often iambic pentameter as not, and in sentences that at times do not cohere internally or from one to the next. The poem is an extended metaphor that develops and illustrates the title, emphasizing the distance between experience and the art that derives: an “equestrian statue of Lot/In Civil War attire” (11.4-5) is far from the person represented, and the words of lyrics “are/Bronze laurels on the forehead of some commander,/Clogged with birdshit. A white trace in time.” (11.18-20) The Bible (reference to Lot), heroic Civil War statuary, prophetic poetry (“It’s all untrue”, 1.9), and Spenser (“No shepherds/In this calendar”, 11.13-14) are all part of a ridiculous heritage, and experience, if it exists at all, is as passé as those cultural monuments as soon as it has dropped into the past. The poem’s purpose is to remove nearly all meaning and value from the “Art Songs” of the title; marking art

and singing are now virtually impossible, and yet “A white trace in time” is not nothing. The discourse contested is that of bardic and civic art, prophecy; the poem has images of a bitter belatedness, flashes of humor snuffed out by *fin de siècle* ironies: exhaustion of lyric, exhaustion of art itself if it can only be the defacing of absurd monuments.

This brief reading of two texts cannot be a proper test of the discourse/counterdiscourse method, though both poems are (while strikingly different) typical of the period. In fact, it is doubtful that exegesis can be a central practice in cultural history of the sort I am proposing, unless thousands of exegeses could be synthesized, and pushed through to judgment.

Because of the lack of a developed discourse/counterdiscourse method of reading, the subject of the relation of poetry to politics is still at the pretheoretical stages. Part of the subject to be addressed is the reason why scholarship itself is resistant and belated, and this, like our study of the poetry itself, will require an inquiry into the norms of the dominant discourse. American New Criticism between 1935-1965 trained generations of students, including me, in the method of close reading that left aside questions of history and biography; the roots of that criticism in USA southern agrarian politics, and in Christian humanist traditions, have some bearing on dominant ideas of poetics in those years. About the mid-1960s the first generation to come after the receding of the New Criticism set about writing the history of postwar American poetry, a task whose pace increased in the 1980s with books by Charles Altieri, Helen Vendler, and Robert von Hallberg among others.⁴ In most surveys, the author spends whole chapters on single writers, though on occasion there are topical chapters titled, for example, “Politics”. The trend in these surveys (Altieri and von Hallberg tend to be exceptions) is to contain, even to repress the category of politics; to whisk away the issue of class, to reduce conflict into the quieter issue of aesthetic paradox, to separate lyric from narrative modes and discursiveness generally —and to keep lyric away from any cultural and ethical issues, and from any broaching of collective consciousness. Helen Vendler, in a review skeptical of von Hallberg’s interest in civic virtues, is typical in her statement that “the referentiality of language in a poem is more inward than outward, even when the topic of the poem is a civic or ethical or mimetic one.”⁵ In this, Vendler resonates with all the deconstructive critics since the 1970s, who would draw attention to the metaphorical sleights of language that make it impossible to accept that literature, through its images or internal structures, is a discourse of action or power.

Critical commentaries on the writers of this era, and also more theoretical accounts of lyric as genre, have variously defended lyric as song and emotion and as the expression of an I-Thou relationship of speaker and implied author.⁶ There is a hope to fix the lyric as the true voice of feeling, as interiority, as the monologic mode, as the cultural bulwark against collective or associative consciousness. Oppositional pairs in critical discourse, such as sincerity/insincerity and private/public, are used to rule out certain varieties of the form that are inconvenient—such as the statemental lyric that argues, or the visionary Whitmanic mode, or the

bardic mode in general, or the series of lyrics set into a directional sequence; or to rule out the purposeful use of non-naturalizing techniques that eliminate (or seem to eliminate) voice and personality. The insistence on the singable, and the personal, as criteria, must certainly rule out a certain kind of poem. Plainly our era requires a more porous and inclusive definition of lyric. With our actual poets in mind, we might call the form since 1945, which was always around but is now the signature of the age, the mixed lyric.

As I turn to imagine a more complete reading of late capitalist lyric, here are three axioms that might influence the making of discriminations and the performing of necessary tasks.

1. *In matters of form and genre, explore the possibilities of the mixed lyric.* Let this include wit and argumentation, description, length, a propensity to be stitched into sequences. Let it also include prose, for the prose-poetry opposition has lost its usefulness. Let the mixed lyric include an alternation among allusion, apostrophe, and forms of narrative in the same textual space—for even when it wishes to suppress the storytelling or speaking forms, the lyric of the era takes some of its shape from the orders it wishes to replace.⁷

2. *In matters of methodology, employ discourse/counterdiscourse as the method of reading.* Richard Terdiman, in his study of antibourgeois writing in nineteenth century France, has shown how there may be breaks in a dominant discourse, impulses to go beyond the fixity, closure, and transparency that are the conditions of existence of a ruling rhetoric.⁸ If late capitalism is a discourse of the forgetting of nature, the unconscious, class, language itself and its opacities; then lyric, as a response to the primary discourse, will very likely propose to return what's lost, assert what's imaginative.

3. *In matters of overall aesthetic theory, explore the postulate of art as humanizing praxis.* The division into public and private spheres of action has had a fatal effect on our ability to think through the relation of politics to literature. Returning to the Romantic origins of this division into spheres, Marx W. Wartofsky finds in Feuerbach and Karl Marx a more inclusive aesthetics wherein the artwork has no merit in itself as use-value or exchange-value; but rather in the process of creation or of appreciation.⁹ “The very activity or praxis of art... is a praxis which comes to know itself, i.e. which takes *itself* as its own object; and... this very activity is a fundamental mode of human self-knowledge. It is therefore a humanizing praxis” (p. 56). This is by analogy to Karl Marx’s “characterization of the labor process as the very process by which human beings achieve their humanity and their sociality” (p. 62). If the artwork is perverted, overpartial, fetishized, then the cause must be an alienated aesthetic consciousness, and the result will be inability to effect self-knowledge, inability to humanize through participation in art. By ruling out the (radical) need to make a mimesis-argument for political poetry, and by ruling out the (conservative) autotelic-sign idea of language and poetic creation, Marx W. Wartofsky’s argument for a critical self-knowledge abolishes many of the prejudices that have delayed a political reading of literature.

Exegetical scholars (Helen Vendler) and deconstructive scholars (Paul de Man) are right to question attempts to build up a chain of mediations between a literary text and the total historical process. The issues raised by the inter-penetration of the fictive and the political need to be specified, put into a system of discriminations. The poetry itself might be divided into a) explicitly political poetry, that describes political events; b) a less direct kind of writing, that articulates, through various baffles, general wishes and fears; and c) the writing that refuses political content or allusion —magnificent as it can be, bourgeois lyric of this third sort is political too, inescapably. Most valuable to define, and also most difficult, is the sense in which all poetry is political, as testimony to the conditions of possibility of its moment, the forces at play during a certain mode of production, the residuum of other times— and the anticipation of yet other times.

It will not do, now, to assert that élitist, conservative, classical poetry has an affinity to order, and that populist or radical writing is insurgent in its modes and forms; too many counterinstances can be brought forward on both sides of the line. Better to assume that textual dissonance drives right down to the order of the stresses and syllables, whatever the explicit politics, or whether there be an explicit politics. For the question should be: what is the nature of the mixed lyric as humanizing praxis, when we read the whole poem (including prosody) by the method of discourse/counterdiscourse?

When the question of literary theory/history is framed this way, certain limited questions in poetics assume more weight than in existing scholarship. For instance, apparently the announcement by Louis Althusser and others of the death of the philosophical subject was highly premature, and in the past twenty years the influential concept of the speaking subject has come to replace the older, New Critical device of the literary persona. In an era when Mikhail Bakhtin's socially-based dialogism is in growing favor, the speaking subject has a political, even collective possibility; one of the tasks to be performed, perhaps the most necessary, is the definition of the speaking subject as woman, as member of a certain race, as user of dialect or of other languages than American English, as victim. Another feature of the whole period is the attempt by most poets, except rigid formalists, to push back the process of registration, in thinking and prosody, toward immediate experience. The dialectic of a naturalizing and a non-naturalizing aesthetics (organic form vs. artificial form) is one of the fascinating features of this period; for poets of declared left and right politics occur on both sides of this debate; and the debate is argued out within the works of single schools of writers, single writers, single poems.

The usual understanding of poetry/politics, public/private, political left/political right is insufficient and part of the impasse of critical thought. These oppositions must be suspended. New terms need to be developed to read poetry as a representation of the public sphere, and to create many and nuanced mediations. The idea is not to sink poetry and the literary in all that they are not, but rather to show these as articulations, at once expressive and critical, of the historical forces of the era.¹⁰ We are not interested in positivities of cause, but in conditions of

possibility. So far as possible, the divisions of consciousness, which have permitted the intermittent shuttling between literature and its political background, need to be overcome. This proposal, then, would affiliate itself with a form of analysis where political and philosophical works are read as part of the same imaginative discourse of the historical era, and where literary documents may be read as cultural and political documents.

NOTES

1. Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1975; original German publication by Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972).
2. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", *New Left Review*, 146 (July-August 1984), pp. 53-92.
3. George Oppen, "Ballad", *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1975), pp. 201-202. John Ashbery, "Art Songs". *The New Republic* (October 26, 1987), p. 32.
4. To list the major studies in alphabetical order: Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1979), and also: *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1984); James E. B. Breslin, *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry, 1945-1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Richard Howard, *Alone With America* (New York: Atheneum, 1969); Charles Molesworth, *The Fierce Embrace* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1979); Helen Vendler, *Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980); Robert von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture, 1945-1980* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).
5. "Looking for Poetry in America", review of von Hallberg (see note 5), with two other books, in *New York Review of Books* (November 7, 1985), pp. 53-60.
6. Books on the idea of lyric that eschew the mixed form are: C. Day Lewis, *The Lyric Impulse* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965); Barbara Hardy, *The Advantage of Lyric: Essays on Feeling in Poetry* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1977); W. R. Johnson, *The Idea of Lyric: Lyric Modes in Ancient and Modern Poetry* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982).

7. A more capacious idea of lyric, pertinent to poetry since 1945, may be found in Marjorie Perloff's chapter, "Postmodernism and the Impasse of Lyric", in *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies of the Pound Tradition* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and in Donald Davie, *Czeslaw Milosz and the Insufficiency of Lyric* (Knoxville, Tenn: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1986).
8. Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counterdiscourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985).
9. Marx W. Wartofsky, "Art as Humanizing Praxis", in *Praxis: A Journal of Radical Perspectives on the Arts*, 1, 1 (Spring, 1975), pp. 56-65.
10. Theodor W. Adorno's essay, "Lyric Poetry and Society", is for me the constitutive statement on the whole topic, with its demand that "Precisely that which is not social in a poem should become its social aspect" (p. 61): *Telos*, 20 (Summer, 1974), pp. 56-71.